

Light, Color, and Visual Illusion in the Poetry of Venantius Fortunatus

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In the early 60s CE Seneca wrote to his correspondent Gaius Lucilius from the villa of the great Roman hero Scipio Africanus, where he was staying. The location provided him with the opportunity to contrast the simplicity of past times with the architectural extravagance of his own day (a commonplace, of course, in Roman moralizing). He picks out for special mention fashions in baths: Scipio's are dark, small in scale, and ill-lit; by comparison, the baths of Seneca's day have walls set with multicolored marble and adorned with large and expensive mirrors, and their ceilings are vaulted and sheathed in glass (*Ep.* 86.6).¹ The insistence on light and color is central to the comparison Seneca is making with Scipio's modest establishment. In particular, the use of cut-glass mosaics on the ceiling would have an especially brilliant effect, when combined with the illumination from external light through the large windows that Seneca goes on to mention (*Ep.* 86.8), as well as the rippling pools of water below for the bathers. Such use of glass tesserae for wall and ceiling mosaics becomes established during the reign of the emperor Tiberius.² Already for Seneca, some thirty years later, the practice is sufficiently familiar to be stigmatized

as commonplace. During the reign of Domitian, the poet Statius, more sympathetic to contemporary taste, praises the brightness and glitter of the multicolored ceiling mosaics in the baths of Claudius Etruscus (*Silv.* 1.5.41–43).³ In his description of the baths, brilliance of subject matter and brilliance of language coincide.

Later poets, inspired by this aesthetic, imagine fantasy structures employing the most precious materials, thereby creating analogous but intensified visual impressions. Claudian, in a virtuoso passage on the palace of Venus, attributes to it columns, walls, and flooring of precious stones, with an outer wall of gold and jewels that reflects the grove with which it is surrounded (*Epith.* 85–91); within Venus sits enthroned, surrounded by reflecting surfaces in which she can observe her own image (106–8). Sidonius's palace of the goddess Dawn is sheathed in gold and picked out with pearls, and contains multicolored jewels that the goddess herself outdoes (*Carm.* 2.418–23). Viewers are disoriented, unable to settle on one object, as competing splendors vie for their attention (*Carm.* 2.420–21).⁴ Similarly the baths of Claudius Etruscus evoke stunned admiration

1 *Pauper sibi videtur ac sordidus nisi parietes magnis et pretiosis orbibus refulserunt, nisi Alexandrina marmora Numidicis crustis distincta sunt, nisi illis undique operosa et in picturae modum variata circumlitio praetextitur, nisi vitro absconditur camera.* I quote Seneca's *Epistulae morales* from the edition of L. D. Reynolds, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1965).

2 See Frank Sear, "Wall and Vault Mosaics," in *Roman Crafts*, ed. D. Strong and D. Brown (London, 1976), 234–35, and L. James, *Light and Colour in Byzantine Art* (Oxford, 1996), 26.

3 *Non limina cessant, / effulgent camerae, vario fastigia vitro / in species animamque nitent.* I quote Statius's *Silvae* from the edition of E. Courtney (Oxford, 1990). Martial praises the variegated marble in the same baths and the effects of light but does not refer to the mosaic sheathing (6.42.8–20).

4 *Diripiunt diversa oculos et ab arte magistra / hoc vincit quodcumque vides.* I quote Sidonius from the edition of A. Loyen, *Sidoine Apollinaire*, vol. 1, *Poèmes* (Paris, 1960). Cf. Procopius, *Aed.* 1.1.47–48 (on Hagia Sophia), and Choricus, *Laudatio Marciani* 1.23 (on the church of St. Sergius at Gaza).

(*stupet*, 43; *mirata*, 50—the reaction is transferred to the fires and waters that occupy the baths). In the poetry of Claudian and Rutilius Namatianus, it is the brilliance and glitter of Rome's temples and spoils of victory that bedazzle (Claudian, *VI Cons. Hon.* 47–52; Rutilius Namatianus, *De reditu suo* 1.95–96—both poets use the participle *micantes/-ia*).

In this article I shall examine how the poetry of Venantius Fortunatus relates to this tradition in his descriptions of the effects of color and light. Born in northern Italy and educated in Ravenna, he was the last Latin poet to have immediate access to the late antique epideictic tradition to which such passages belong. In addition, he would have had firsthand experience of the brilliance of the mosaicists' art in the churches of that city. But in the mid-560s he moved, for whatever reason, to the Frankish kingdoms of Merovingian Gaul, where he employed his poetic abilities in the service of royalty, leading secular figures, and especially the bishops of his adopted homeland. Most of his poetry is quite simple by late antique standards, but his poems to bishops include a number of descriptions of churches in which light, and less often color, play a significant role.⁵ Visually detailed descriptions (ecphrases) of objects and locations in his work show the same preoccupation with optical effects, often suggesting figural dimensions to the play of light that transcend the perception of immediate physical reality.

Inner Illumination

Fortunatus regularly describes churches as possessing their own inner light, the result of "capturing," "seizing," or "enclosing" daylight within their walls. The effect is achieved by artistic skill (*artificisque manu*, 2.10.14; *arte*, 3.23.16) and depends on the presence of wide glass windows, set like eyes in the basilica (2.10.13, 3.7.47, 10.6.89). The many reflecting surfaces (cf. 1.1.11, *emicat aula potens solido perfecta metallo*) create the impression that light is trapped within the building, which seems to have its own source of light. The theme is common in descriptions of churches: it is found in the writings of the late

fifth-/early sixth-century bishop of Vienne, Avitus; in an inscription from St. Peter's in Rome from the early sixth century; and less explicitly in the poetry of Prudentius and Sidonius Apollinaris.⁶ In secular architecture baths possess the same capacity to trap the light, and already in the first century Statius admires this quality in the baths of Claudius Etruscus (1.5.45–46).⁷

Not surprisingly such a feature inspires spiritual interpretation. Their continual, abundant light makes the churches suitable habitations for God (1.1.15–16, 1.9.20). In particular Fortunatus praises Bishop Leontius of Bordeaux for his foundation of a church dedicated to Mary, which, he says, mimics the virgin herself: "the glittering church, full of light, is an imitation of Mary: she enclosed in her womb the light, it encloses the day" (*lumine plena micans imitata est aula Mariam: / illa utero lucem clausit et ista diem*, 1.15.57–8).

Generally such passages are brief and adopt a detached perspective, without describing the reaction of an observer. But in Fortunatus's fullest description of a church building—Bishop Felix's just-dedicated cathedral at Nantes—he does imagine a viewer, though the point of view is from outside the basilica, not inside, and it is night, not daytime.

Luna coronato quotiens radiaverit ortu,
alter ab aede sacra surgit ad astra iubar.
Si nocte inspiciat hunc praetereundo viator,
et terram stellas credit habere suas.
Tota rapit radios, patulis oculata fenestris,
et quod mireris hic foris, intus habes.
Tempore quo redeunt tenebrae, mihi dicere fas sit,
mundus habet noctem, detinet aula diem.
(3.7.43–50)

Whenever the moon shines forth in its haloed rising,
a second beam mounts to the stars from the
holy church.
If a traveler passing by night turns to look this way,
he thinks the earth now has its own constellations.

5 On these poems, see M. Roberts, *The Humblest Sparrow: The Poetry of Venantius Fortunatus* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 2009), 61–71. I quote Fortunatus's poetry in the editions of M. Reydellet, *Venance Fortunat, poèmes*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1994–2004), and S. Quesnel, *Venance Fortunat, Vie de Saint Martin* (Paris, 1996). All translations are mine.

6 Avitus, *Hom.* 28/29 and *Ep.* 50, *ILCV* 1756.3; cf. Prudentius, *Perist.* 12.49–50, and Sidonius, *Ep.* 2.10.4 (vv. 8–10).

7 The same quality is attributed to baths built by the Vandal king Thrasamund (*Anthologia Latina* 204.12, ed. D. R. Shackleton Bailey [Stuttgart, 1982]), to the palace of Cupid by Apuleius in the *Metamorphoses* (5.1), and to Hagia Sophia by Procopius (*Aed.* 1.1.30).

The whole building ensnares the light, with wide-open
windows like eyes,
and what you wonder at from outside, you enjoy
when within.

At the time when the darkness returns, if I may so say,
the world experiences night, the church still
retains the day.

The passage is a little difficult to interpret. The first two couplets probably look back to Fortunatus's immediately preceding reference to the cathedral's tin roof, which to the nighttime traveler appears to glow and glitter with its own light. The last two couplets refer to the property of the basilica of retaining light, a source of wonder to the outside observer. Even at night, we are told, the church still retains its daylight. Fortunatus records a similar property of Gregory of Tours's newly restored basilica, "where artfully daylight is enclosed in the dark of night" (*qua noctis tenebris clauditur arte dies*, 10.6.90).⁸ It is not clear how such retention is possible without some source of light—perhaps we must imagine lamps whose light is intensified by the reflecting surfaces of the church. Certainly the image of a traveler who passes through the darkness of night and sees the cathedral shining or illuminated by what appears to be its own light is a powerful metaphor for the hope of security and salvation provided by the church.

Light, Color, and Animation

Fortunatus refers to figural decoration in the churches he describes only four times in all. In all but one of these cases he emphasizes their lifelike appearance. This is, of course, a commonplace of Roman response to art, though Fortunatus is not above reversing it in a different context when he describes the variegated appearance of apples served to him at a banquet as like a picture (*undique concurrunt variato mala colore, / credas ut pictas me meruisse dapes*, 6.7.5). But Fortunatus also gives some hints about how this appearance of life is achieved. In his account, it depends primarily not on realistic representation but rather on the play of color and light.

For instance, the church completed by Leontius of Bordeaux at Saintes to hold the body of the

8 I follow here the text of F. Leo, *Venanti Honori Clementiani Fortunati Presbyteri Italici Opera Poetica*, MGH *AA* 4.1 (Berlin, 1881).

fifth-century bishop Bibianus had a gilded, coffered ceiling, decorated with representations of wild animals (1.12.15–18). Fortunatus especially praises the skill of the artist's work and the brilliance of the paneling, which create the impression that the animals are alive. The impression depends, it is implied, on the light flashing off the gilded roof.⁹

In the other two cases (3.7.35–40 and 10.6.91–92), the cathedrals of Nantes and Tours, the animating effect is attributed specifically to the colors (*fuci*) of the images, but both contexts make it clear that the light that floods the basilicas is the essential condition for the animation through color of the figures. The passage describing the figures represented on the central tower of the cathedral at Nantes is especially detailed:

Illic expositos fucis animantibus artus
vivere picturas arte reflante putas.
Ire redire vides radio crispante figuras
atque lacunar agit quod maris unda solet.
(3.7.35–36, 39–40)¹⁰

There colors bring life to limbs on display;
you'd think the pictures were living, animated by art.
You see the figures come and go in the
undulating sunlight;
the paneled ceiling behaves like the waves of the sea.

The participial phrase *radio crispante*, which I've translated "in the undulating sunlight," describes the rays of light shimmering with varying intensity on the reflective surface of the ceiling of the church. Color and the flickering illumination of light combine to animate the figures portrayed there. The effect is like a wave passing across the panels of the ceiling. Light vivifies and brings a body's colors to life, like a restorative wave of water. Again the Christian connotations are not far to seek.

9 See especially the last couplet, *Ingenio perfecta novo tabulata coruscant / artificemque putas hic animasse feras*.

10 I here follow W. Meyer, *Der Gelegenheitsdichter Venantius Fortunatus*, Abhandlungen der königlichen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen, Phil.-hist.Kl. N.F. 4, no. 5 (Berlin, 1901), 79–80, in transposing lines 39–40 to follow 36.

Visual Illusion

The examples cited in the previous section imply the presence of visual illusion, as the repetition of the verb *putas, putes* (“you suppose,” “you might suppose”) in all three passages indicates. But the most striking example of visual illusion in Fortunatus’s poetry involving liquid, color, and light occurs in his versification of Sulpicius Severus’s life of Martin of Tours in a secular context, as he describes the banquet of the usurping emperor Maximus. The subject of a luxurious banquet is a favorite one for elaborate description in Latin literature. Both Fortunatus and his fifth-century predecessor Paulinus of Périgueux, who also wrote a verse life of Martin, seize the opportunity offered by Sulpicius’s text to expand on their original.¹¹ In particular they elaborate on the drinking vessels and the liquid they contain. For Paulinus, “large crystal goblets enclose liquid clear as glass, and since the cup and the drink within it have the same appearance, you would think the enclosing vessel could not contain the draught within” (3.99–101).¹² Such vessels epitomize rich serving ware, indexing the wealth and status of their owner. But Paulinus particularly emphasizes the visual illusion involved. Container and contained are indistinguishable. The drink in the cups is described as “clear as glass” (Latin *vitreus*), a word that suggests something both translucent and glistening, and is regularly used of the appearance of water and other liquids. It is equally applicable, though, to the crystal goblets that contain the drink; they too are “clear as glass” (*vitreus* is a regular epithet for crystal). Already in the first line, in the choice of adjective, Paulinus points to the theme of the passage: the indistinguishability of cup and contents.

Fortunatus, as is often the case, takes Paulinus’s version and goes one step further, in a spirit of competition (*aemulatio*):¹³

Lucida perspicuis certantia vina lapillis,
vix discernendis cristallina pocula potis.
Inde calix niveus variat per vina colores,
hinc mentita bibunt patera fucante Falerna.
(*Vita sancti Martini* 2.82–85)

Bright wine vying with translucent jewels,
crystal goblets with the drinks from which they are
scarcely distinguishable.
On one side a snow-white cup diffuses colors
through the wine,
on the other the guests drink counterfeit Falernian,
dyed by the bowl.

Fortunatus’s version is much more complicated. He refers to translucency, to refraction, and to the effect that the color of a wine bowl has on the appearance of the wine. The first two lines rephrase Paulinus’s account of the indistinguishability (*vix discernendis*) of contained and container. (Paulinus refers to drinking from jewels right after the lines I quote.)¹⁴ But Fortunatus then goes on to imagine light refracted by the glass of the cup, thereby creating a variety of colors in the wine. In the last line, I take it, we are to imagine the color of the shallow dish or bowl (*patera*) communicating itself to the wine that is in it, making it look like Falernian.

Fortunatus’s passage displays an alertness to the effects that can be achieved by the interaction of light and various translucent, refracting, or light-reflecting or -absorbing surfaces. The passage is set in both poets in a scene of extravagant luxury that has something in common with the fantasy palace descriptions of late Latin poetry. In both cases the visual illusion, the breakdown of distinctions between separate objects—in this case the cups and the liquid they contain—creates an effect of transcendence, a perceptual world in which the viewer is disoriented and the normal categories do not apply. Here the function is to communicate the almost otherworldly quality of the splendor of the imperial banquet, what Fortunatus in another context calls *regia pompa* (*Carm.* 3.6.4). But earlier the Spanish poet Prudentius, writing perhaps in the first year or two

11 For a discussion of these passages, see M. Roberts, “Martin Meets Maximus: The Meaning of a Late Roman Banquet,” *REA* 41 (1995): 91–111.

12 *Sustenant vitreas crystallae capacia lymphas, / cumque ipsa et conchae species videatur et undae / nec cohibere putes susceptum claustra liquorem*. I cite Paulinus’s *Vita sancti Martini* from the edition of M. Petschenig, CSEL 16 (Milan, 1888), 1–190.

13 For Fortunatus’s knowledge of and engagement with the work of Paulinus of Périgueux, see S. Labarre, *Le manteau partagé: Deux métamorphoses poétiques de la Vie de saint Martin chez Paulin de*

Périgueux (V^e s.) et Venance Fortunat (VI^e s.) (Paris, 1998), 247–51, and Roberts, *The Humblest Sparrow*, 222–24.

14 *Pocula funduntur gemmis gemmisque bibuntur; Vita sancti Martini* 3.102.

of the fifth century, had written of a comparable visual illusion when describing a baptistery in Rome (*Perist.* 12.39–42). Above the baptismal pool is a ceiling mosaic whose colors dye the water below as the water changes the hue of the vault above it. The passage ends with a studiedly ambiguous line: literally, “you would think that the paneled ceiling was being moved by waves” (*credas moveri fluctibus lacunar*, 42).¹⁵ It is unclear whether the imagined observer is directing his gaze to the ceiling, which appears to be moving as it reflects the waves below, or to the pool, where he sees the reflection of the ceiling apparently set in motion by waves. Once more, two distinct objects become indistinguishable. The observer is momentarily disoriented: what is real and what is reflection? The space of the baptistery is animated by shimmering light and rippling water, a suitable location for the living waters of Christ referred to in the next couplet.¹⁶

Flowers and Jewels

Both flowers and jewels possess the qualities of color and light; Fortunatus speaks of *lumina florum* (3.9.13) and of *lumina gemmarum* (6.1.102). The phrase “jeweled meadows,” combining both images, can be used of a literal landscape (cf. 1.20.12), but also expresses an aesthetic ideal.¹⁷ Fortunatus speaks of the “jeweled meadows” of his predecessors in Christian poetry at the beginning of his *Vita s. Martini* (1.37); Prudentius, in the poem already quoted, conforms to the same criterion of aesthetic evaluation when he describes the appearance of a mosaic, probably on the triumphal arch or in the apse of S. Paolo fuori le mura, as “meadows

brilliant with springtime flowers” (*Perist.* 12.53–54).¹⁸ The mosaic is of multicolored glass tesserae. Colored glass is at least as capable of creating the brilliant effects of light and color admired in such compositions—the jeweled meadows—as are literal jewels.

Flowers consistently figure paradise in Fortunatus, as in Christian literature in general. In a number of poems to the women of the convent of the Holy Cross—its founder and its abbess, Radegund and Agnes—Fortunatus exploits this symbolism. He presents gifts of flowers to the two women and describes floral arrangements, for an altar and a dining table, that they have prepared. All are presentiments of the heavenly reward they can expect for their ascetic lives.

In fact, a flowered/bejeweled landscape serves as a metaphor for the state of Christian virginity. In his *Dialogues* Sulpicius Severus attributes to Martin of Tours a parable in which he interprets a flowery meadow as a model of that state: the meadow, he quotes Martin as saying, like virginity, “possesses a brilliance that exceeds all beauty, bedecked with flowers as if adorned with glittering jewels” (*Dial.* 2.10.4).¹⁹ The passage evokes a restrained treatment in Fortunatus’s version of the life, probably because his predecessor, Paulinus of Périgueux, had vastly elaborated the passage in devoting twenty-five lines to its glories (*Vita s. Martini* 4.554–78), describing interchangeably the multicolored jewels and flowers that adorned the meadow, as well as its scents, sound, and movement. Paulinus adds a detail not in his original—a transparent stream through whose glass-like waters stones are visible on the river bottom: “their beauty,” we are told, “is visible to the eyes but protected by the waves” (*pervia luminibus species et gurgite tecta*, *Vita s. Martini* 4.578). The passage seems to owe something to the fourth-century poet Ausonius and his description of the similarly clear waters of the river Moselle, which also seeks protection for its secrets (*Mos.* 55–74, 187–88). The transparent but impenetrable waters in this case suggest a metaphor for the purity of the enclosed virgin.

15 The full passage is *Omnicolor vitreas pictura superne tinguunt undas, / musci relucet et virescit aurum / cyaneusque latex umbram trahit imminentis ostri; / credas moveri fluctibus lacunar; Aurelii Prudentii Clementis Carmina*, ed. M. P. Cunningham, CCSL 126 (Turnhout, 1966). For a fuller discussion of this passage, see M. Roberts, *Poetry and the Cult of the Martyrs: The Liber Peristephanon of Prudentius* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1993), 175–77.

16 Cf. J. Fontaine, “Le pèlerinage de Prudence à Saint-Pierre et la spiritualité des eaux vives,” *Orpheus* 11 (1964): 259–62, reprinted in his *Études sur la poésie latine tardive d’Ausone à Prudence* (Paris, 1980), 479–82.

17 On the language of flowers and jewels as an aesthetic ideal, see M. Roberts, *The Jeweled Style: Poetry and Poetics in Late Antiquity* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1989).

18 *Tum camiros hyalo insigni varie cucurrit arcus; / sic prata vernis floribus renident.*

19 *Omnem speciem distincta floribus, quasi micantibus ornata radiat.* I quote Sulpicius Severus’s *Dialogues* from the edition of Jacques Fontaine and Nicole Dupré, *Sulpice Sévère, Gallus: Dialogues sur les “Vertus” de Saint Martin*, SC 510 (Paris, 2006).

Christian authors had their own equivalent of the *locus amoenus* and the fantasy palace description of the secular poetic tradition in accounts of paradise and of the court of heaven. (Paulinus's meadow of virginity is clearly in the paradise mold.) Fortunatus's poetry contains no developed account of paradise, but he does describe the jeweled palace of heaven, with its construction of chrysolite, emerald door posts, sardoniy thresholds, and surrounding portico of hyacinth (8.4.17–20; cf. 10.7.23).²⁰ The golden glitter of the heavenly court was matched, he emphasizes, by the brilliance of its occupants (8.4.21–22).²¹ In his poem on the life of Martin he ends his third book with an account of the twelve gates of the city of Zion, based on Revelation (*Vita s. Martini* 3.509–16; Rev. 21:10–27) but incorporating language from perhaps the *fons et origo* of fantasy palace descriptions in Latin poetry: the palace of the Sun at the beginning of book 2 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (*lumine valvas*, *Vita s. Martini* 3.512; *lumine valvae*, Ovid, *Met.* 2.4). The gates provide a ceremonial entryway for the heavenly company into the starbright celestial city (*sideream . . . urbem*, 518).

The third context where jewels and bright colors combine is in the description of dress. Two rather similar passages—one in Fortunatus's lengthy poem on virginity, the other in his version of the life of Martin—describe the elaborate costumes of female figures. In the first case the subject is the Christian virgin, as she is received into the heavenly bridal chamber.

Inseritur capiti radians diadema berillis,
ordinibus variis alba zmaragdus inest.
Alligat et nitidos ametistina vitta capillos,
margaritato flexilis arte sinu.
Sardoniche inpressum per colla monile coruscat,
sardia purpurea luce metalla micant.
Dextrae armilla datur carcedone, iaspide mixta,
aut hyacinteo sudat honore manus.
Brattea gemmatam cycladem fila catenant,
sidereis donis arte sigilla tument.
Pulchra topaziacis oneratur zona lapillis,

20 *Sunt ibi chrysolithis fabricata palatia gemmis / atque zmaragdi-
neo ianua poste viret. / Limina sardonichum variato lumine florent /
et hyacintheus circuit ordo domum.*

21 *Aurea tecta micant, plebs aurea fulget in aula / et cum rege pio
turba corusca nitet.*

chrysolita aurata fibula claudit acu,
veste superposita: bis cocto purpura bysso,
qualem nupta Deo ferre puella potest.
His cumulata bonis thalamo regina sedebit,
atque poli solem sub pede virgo premet.
(*Carm.* 8.3.263–78)

On her head was set a brilliant diadem of beryl,
along with pearls and emeralds in multicolored rows.
A band of amethyst encircles her shining hair,
skillfully curved and ringed with pearls.
On her neck a necklace studded with sardoniy glistens
and precious sard twinkles with a purple glow.
Her hand wears a bracelet of chalcedony, mingled
with jasper,
and sweats with the brilliance of hyacinth that
it bears.
Gold threads interlace her jeweled robe,
and by heaven's gift figures skillfully stand out
in relief.
Her lovely girdle is studded by topaz gemstones,
a golden brooch snaps shut with chrysolite pin.
On top her dress, linen twice-dyed in purple,
as befits a girl to wear, the betrothed of God.
Endowed with these treasures she will sit as queen in
the bridal chamber,
and as virgin tread beneath her feet the sun in
the heavens.

The second passage describes Martin's vision of the Virgin Mary.

Vidisti templum domini diademate fultum,
vidisti thalamum sponsi super omnia pulchri,
conpositum gemmis auroque ostroque decorum.
Qualis iaspis erat pedibus laterique topazus,
qui digitis anuli viridi fulgore venusti,
quales armillae dextrae ardescente hyacinto,
quanto zona die lapidum radiabat honore,
cycladis aut qualis cataclysis effora rasis,
quae palla ex humeris mixto chrysopraxe berillis,
quodve monile decens collo rutilabat in illo?
Forsan erat nitidis ametistina vitta capillis,

sculptilis inpressis et in auribus alba sigillis,
luminis ac varios spargens diadema virores?
Quae frons, ora, oculi, facies, gena, pes, manus, ulna,
unde repercussis florebant gramina gemmis?
(*Vita s. Martini* 3.460–74)

You have seen the temple of the Lord adorned with
a diadem,
you have seen the chamber of the bridegroom, who
is supremely beautiful;
set as it is with jewels, lovely with gold and purple.
What jasper did she wear on her feet, what topaz on
her body?
What of the rings on her fingers, of splendid, eye-
catching green,
and the bracelets on her hands of blazing hyacinth?
How bright was her girdle that shone with the
radiance of jewels,
how appeared her robe studded with polished gems,
and how too the cloak on her shoulders, of
chrysoprase and beryl?
Perhaps she had a band of amethyst on her
shining hair
and in her ears pearls inlaid with worked figures,
and a diadem scattering multicolored radiances
of light?
Her brow, mouth, eyes, face, cheeks, foot, hands,
arms, how did they look,
from which grass became flowered, reflecting
their jewels?

The closest parallel in secular literature is Claudian's description of the consular robe of the emperor Honorius for his fourth consulship (*IV Cons. Hon.* 585–92), in which he emphasizes the use of gold and jewels. Otherwise, descriptions of consular togas or tapestries are entirely representational in content (Claudian, *Cons. Stil.* 2.339–61 and *Rapt.* 1.246–70; Sidonius, *Carm.* 15.150–84): that is, they display mythological or other scenes appropriate to the wearer. In the passages from Fortunatus, dress consists of multiple bejeweled items, without any attempt to depict a scene, though there are references to figures (*sigilla*) on the virgin's robe and on Mary's earrings (*Carm.* 8.3.272; *Vita s. Martini* 3.471). The organization is by item of clothing or jewelry and

normally, though not invariably, by part of the body clothed. In the case of the virgin, the description broadly speaking proceeds from the head and moves down to the belt (*zona*, 8.3.273); in the case of Mary, the direction is reversed: it begins with footwear and ascends to the head. The two passages use the same phrase for the headband (*vitta*) that the women wear: of the Christian virgin, "a band of amethyst encircles her shining hair" (8.3.265); of Mary, "perhaps she had a band of amethyst on her shining hair" (*Vita s. Martini* 3.470)—the qualification is added because Fortunatus is speculating about how Mary appeared in a vision to Martin; Sulpicius Severus just says "Martin told us of [her] remarkable face and dress" (*Dial.* 2.13.5).²² The most recent editor of Fortunatus's *Life of Martin* compares his description of Mary with the image of Theodora in the famous mosaic of S. Vitale in Ravenna.²³ There are evident parallels in the prominence of jewelry as index of status, though the systematic translation of the language of costume into that of precious stones goes beyond what is possible in the mosaic.²⁴ The Christian virgin is "a source of radiant light" (*radiantia lumina fundis*, 8.3.317) and herself becomes a "glittering jewel" (*tu quoque gemma micas*, 8.3.318).

Each passage ends in interesting fashion. The poet concludes his speculation about the appearance of Mary: "Her brow, mouth, eyes, face, cheeks, foot, hands, arms, how did they look, / from which grass became flowered, reflecting their jewels?" (*Vita s. Martini* 3.473–74). Mary is a vision of color and light that communicates itself by reflection to her surroundings, emitting an undifferentiated, brilliantly colored radiance. The grass in question could either be of the terrestrial location where Martin has the vision or of heaven, to which his vision transports him. It is not clear whether it in some way reflects the color of the jewels, and so appears flowered, or whether we are to imagine it as literally flowered, the colors of the blooms

22 *Referebat autem nobis vultum atque habitum.*

23 Quesnel, *Venance Fortunat*, 152.

24 Compare Fortunatus's account of a jeweled cloak that the former prefect Arborius sees clothing the saint's arm when he is conducting mass (*Vita s. Martini* 4.305–30). In this case, the jewels form the actual stuff of which the cloak is woven. On this passage, see G. de Nie, "The Poet as Visionary: Venantius Fortunatus's 'New Mantle' for Saint Martin," *Cassiodorus* 3 (1997): 49–83, reprinted in her *Word, Image and Experience: Dynamics of Miracle and Self-Perception in Sixth-Century Gaul* (Aldershot, 2003).

picking up those of the precious stones on Mary's dress. Ultimately the blurring of such divisions is the point. In Martin's spiritual world such distinctions, between figure and environment, heaven and earth, lose their purchase. Effects of color and light produce a transfiguration.

In the case of the Christian virgin, Fortunatus ends with a hieratic image that embodies the regal status she now enjoys. The image is a powerful one—an enthroned queen (*regina*), richly bedecked with jewels and lording it over the sun and the heavens. It suggests that in the case of Mary too, as described in the *Life of Martin*, we should see her as a *regina*, though her royal status derives from her virginity rather than from her glory as mother of Christ.²⁵

In sum, Fortunatus shows himself sensitive to the importance of color and light in the artistic vocabulary of the late Roman church. On the one hand, a number of passages I have discussed can be situated in a tradition of architectural description that goes back to the first-century CE poet Statius. Fortunatus is the last poet in the west to inherit this tradition unbroken. But it is also hard to avoid the sense that his descriptions derive, at least in part, from personal observation: of the impression, created by the reflective surfaces of a church, that daylight is caught within the building and that it possesses its own source of light; of the appearance of a church from a distance at night; of the effect of sunlight rippling across a paneled, painted ceiling. Equally, his description of the jeweled splendor of heaven—which is regularly populated by a roll call of patriarchs, prophets, apostles, martyrs, saints, and

virgins—probably owes something to the appearance of such figures in the churches of Ravenna. Although Fortunatus contrasts the regal finery of Maximus's banquet unfavorably with Martin's self-effacing demeanor (*Vita s. Martini* 2.94–95), in a heavenly context he has no compunction in deploying the full resources of the late Roman language of material display, especially its jeweled finery, to communicate the glory of Christ's court and its occupants. Whether in a secular or a religious context, the confusion of visual impression created by effects of light serves to transfigure an object or environment and to communicate superhuman splendor. In Christian contexts it also communicates the interpenetration of the spiritual and material worlds.²⁶

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26 For the ability of architectural brilliance and effects of color and light to dissolve the boundaries between matter and spirit, see P. C. Miller, *The Corporeal Imagination: Signifying the Holy in Late Ancient Christianity* (Philadelphia, 2009), 9–11, 79. In *God and Gold in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, 1998), D. Janes amply demonstrates the continuity between secular displays of worldly splendor and the Christian visual language of divine glory and transcendence.

25 See Av. Cameron, "The Theotokos in Sixth-Century Constantinople," *JTS* 29 (1978): 105–8, reprinted in her *Continuity and Change in Sixth-Century Byzantium* (London, 1981). Cameron discusses Fortunatus's connections with Constantinople and his attitude to Mary, but does not take into account the passage in the *Vita s. Martini*.